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Younger patients being treated at IU Health Proton Therapy Center

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During the past 14 months, the IU Health Proton Therapy Center has added two pediatric radiation oncologists to its staff, and plans to add a third one by the end of the year.

Susan Dabkowski, Jill's House director, said those recruits have helped make the Proton Therapy Center one of the most respected centers in the U.S. for treating childhood cancers.

"The center has carved out a niche in the market that has given it a competitive edge, and as a result has seen its child patient volume increase," she said. "We have benefited from that trend as well."

Dabkowski said prior to 2011, one of every six patients at Jill's House was younger than 18. But during the first half of 2011, one of every three patients at Jill's House has been younger than 18.

"And in July of this year, the number of pediatric check-ins at Jill's House actually exceeded the adult patient numbers, and that is the first time that has happened," she said. "The fastest-growing group of patients at Jill's House is children."

The percentage of children treated at the IU Health Proton Therapy Center has risen from 14 percent in fiscal year 2008-09 to 26 percent in 2009-10 to 27 percent in 2010-11. Of the 74 children treated in 2010-11, 56 were treated for cancers of the head, neck or central nervous system.

Amanda Burnham, spokeswoman for the proton therapy center, said when the proton center adds a third pediatric radiation oncologist later this year, it will become one of only two centers in the U.S. with such a high level of commitment to treating children.

"It is our understanding no other proton center places the same emphasis as a percentage of their workloads on pediatrics," she said.

Burnham said one reason the proton center is able to treat so many children is because of the anesthesia support it receives from Bloomington Anesthesiologists. Many youngsters are unable to remain still during proton therapy treatments without anesthesia.

"This group of anesthesiologists received their training in pediatric anesthesia at Riley," said Dr. Peter Johnstone, CEO, president and medical director of the IU Health Proton Therapy Center. "Without their expertise in pediatric anesthesia while under treatment, this work would not be possible."

Burnham said proton therapy is one of the best ways to treat pediatric tumors, because of the precision of the proton beam and its ability to deliver a high dose directly to the tumor.

“We are able to attack the tumor without affecting the otherwise healthy tissues and organs area around the tumors,” she said. “This is essential when you are working with children, whose minds and bodies are growing and developing.”

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